

PHENIX CITY FIRE DEPARTMENT

Three-alarm turmoil

Disputes, alleged threats, coercion, harassment fan flames of mistrust

By CHUCK WILLIAMS
Staff Writer

The department is in turmoil.

When the alarm sounds at the Phenix City Fire Department, it's all business. Everybody — the fire chief, command staff, firefighters and politicians — agrees on that. But that's where the agreement ends and the bickering begins.

Some firefighters say they are mistreated by management and the city — and work in an atmosphere of intimidation, coercion, derogatory comments, threats and harassment. "Morale is at the lowest point since I've been here," said Sgt. David Davis, a seven-year veteran and president of the

Phenix City Firefighters Association.

Chief Wallace Hunter, a 20-year career Phenix City firefighter



Davis

who assumed the top job in May, said attitude is the issue. "When you come in with a negative attitude, you are going to have a negative day," he said. "And you are going to make everything negative around you."



Hunter

Twice, departmental disputes have ended up in federal court — both times the city prevailed. Over the last five years, 29 firefighters have left for a variety of reasons, including retirement and medical

disability.

The city has spots for 51 firefighters, and 44 are currently on that force. They staff three stations 24-hours a day, with firefighters working 24 hours on and 48 hours off.

A majority of the city's firefighters are represented by the firefighters association, a union the city does not have to legally recognize. The association has about 30 members. Ten Phenix City firefighters

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"God has chosen a garden to plant us in and now we need to grow."

Carolyn Brown, Violet, La., evacuee on arrival in Columbus



Learning lessons from New Orleans

Disaster-prone U.S. cities scramble to create plans to handle the next big one.

FIRE FIGHT | 'A little more give and take' needed

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agreed to discuss department issues Tuesday with the Ledger-Enquirer. The one-hour interview was conducted with all of them at the same time, the only way they would agree to talk. Those who attended were Capt. Robert Gaskin; Sgts. Davis, Karl Taylorson, James Ellerbee, Anne Land, Jeff Bowden and Scott Johnson; and firefighters Lance Wagner, William Miles and Marc Wells.

Several of the firefighters said they feared their jobs would be threatened if they talked about the problems inside the department.

"Everyone sitting in this room is worried to death about this," Taylorson said.

Davis puts it this way: "We are reluctant to talk because of significant fear of retaliation, being disciplined or fired."

According to the rules Phenix City employees must follow, an employee can be discharged for speech that "impairs discipline and harmony in the workplace" or "speech which jeopardizes close personal loyalty."

During the interview, firefighters laid out a litany of complaints, including:

- Disparity in treatment of union and non personnel.
- Intimidation, coercion, derogatory comments, threats and harassment of union members.
- Micromanagement.

They were vague about specific incidents, but focused on the general nature of their complaints.

An hour after the interview, Johnson asked that his name not be included in those who talked to the reporter. He did not make any comments during the interview. The next day, the chief asked that Johnson's name be excluded from the list.

'Disgruntled clique'

Capt. Mickey Hutchinson has been with the Phenix City Fire Department for 15 years. He said activity from the firefighters association is causing most of the turmoil.

"We have a clique that is disgruntled," Hutchinson said. "They don't like the way things are going, so they are causing turmoil."

He said the dissension is wearing thin in the department.

"Some people are getting tired of the crap," Hutchinson said. "People need to come in and do their jobs without worry about the penny-ante stuff."

That "penny-ante stuff" that some firefighters say is at the core of the problem.

Put the dispute in a fire house — there are three of them in Phenix City — and it just festers. Firefighters live and work together in 24-hour chunks.



Bowden



Gaskin



Taylorson

guys who complained he was hurt on the job," Hardin said. "He was working on swap time. He was on workman's comp. It's hard to insure two people at the same time when only one is working. What about the person who was supposed to be working? Were we also insuring him? The insurance company advised us not to do that."

The history

Past disputes have spilled over into the courts.

In May, a federal jury ruled against two former Phenix City firefighters who were asking for nearly \$1 million in damages for the loss of their jobs.

Randy Doster and Dennis Duty sued the city of Phenix City, former Fire Chief Ronnie Blankenship, former City Manager Bobby Gaylor, former Chief Prater, Chief Hunter and Assistant Chief Johansen.

The U.S. District Court jury in Opelika, Ala., deliberated less than an hour and a half before ruling in favor of all six defendants.

It wasn't the first time the city won a federal lawsuit.

In March, U.S. District Judge Myron Thompson of the Middle District of Alabama dismissed a \$6.2 million lawsuit against Phenix City. Phenix Lumber Company filed the suit against the city and Blankenship, alleging the former chief refused to let firefighters battle a sawmill fire in 1998.

In 2001, Doster and Duty accused Blankenship of instructing firefighters to let the sawmill burn. Blankenship denied the charge. Duty and Doster claimed their problems in the department started after those allegations.

Duty was the president of the firefighters association. When he lost the lawsuit, Davis became the association's leader.

Jim McKoon, a Phenix City attorney who represented the city in both federal lawsuits, said the complaints from the firefighters are the same ones two juries heard from Duty and Doster.

"We won at every turn," McKoon said. "Every time you put this in front of a jury or fact-finder, they can see what's going on."

McKoon said he has advised Hunter to run a tight ship.

"The last three fire chiefs have tried to

Robert Gaskin, 40, has been with Phenix City department for more than 15 years. He is less than nine years from retirement that would pay him 60 per cent of his top three annual salaries.

He has applied for a civilian job in Idaho. "I would rather go do that and take the risk in a combat zone riding a big red truck than say 'shoot me' than be here," Gaskin said.

Some have already left.

Since January 2000, there have been 15 employees to leave the Phenix City Department. The departures break down the following way:

- Twenty-one employees resigned.
- Three employees retired.
- Two employees went out on medical disability retirement.
- Three employees were dismissed.

Don't read too much into those numbers, the chief said.

"People want to distort that," Hunter said. He points out that firefighters left for career advancement and relocation reasons.

How does it end?

One of those people who resigned was Bubba Stephens, who spent 14 years in the Phenix City Fire Department. Hunter Stephens told him when he left in April 2000 to concentrate on his second job as a landscaper.

That is not the only reason Stephens says he left the force. He says he was tired of what is happening in Louisiana and Mississippi and he misses his job.

"One of the reasons I left was I thought it was going to get any better," Stephens said.

He said others are talking to him about walking away.

"They look at us like we are rebels," said Stephens, 39. "But if you beat us down, we will turn around and fight you."

Taylorson and the other union firefighters say they are looking for a change. That is part of the reason they sat for the interview.

"I hope the right person hears it and comes in to help," Taylorson said. "I want to be a citizen, the city manager, the council member. We're just looking for a savior."

It is time for those who have problems with management to make decisions, chief said.

"I am sick and tired of it," Hunter said. "If it is too much on people, they need to make a decision on which direction they need to go."

The union firefighters say they hear the same thing from command staff on a regular basis.

"Basically, if you are not happy you need to leave, that is what we have been told several times," said Sgt. Anne Land, a seven-year veteran of the Phenix City Fire Department.

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'Gruntled clique'

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"Nothing is a secret in the fire department," said Assistant Fire Chief Kenneth Johansen.

At the center of the complaints is a threat to change the firefighters' work schedules. The department has already eliminated "swap time," a practice that allows a firefighter to swap a shift with another firefighter. It allows flexibility for personal advancement and time off for personal reasons.

The practice was eliminated by former Chief Jerry Prater in January. Other fire departments, including the Columbus Fire and Emergency Medical Services Department, allow swap time.

This move upset a number of the firefighters. They say swap time was used to maintain and achieve educational requirements of the department. Currently, none of the Phenix City firefighters are enrolled in the fire sciences courses at Chattahoochee Valley Community College. Such courses are needed for firefighters to get promoted.

Taylorson, a 10-year veteran, said he has used swap time to spend time with his family and do community service.

"It allows me to coach ball," he said.

In an Aug. 3 memo to Phenix City Manager Bubba Roberts, Hunter defended the elimination of swap time.

"Swap time was abused by some employees so they could work their part-time jobs," Hunter wrote.

Mayor Jeff Hardin said swap time was eliminated because of concerns from the city's insurance carrier.

It stemmed from a lawsuit by one of the

against Phenix City. Phenix Lumber Company filed the suit against the city and Blankenship, alleging the former chief refused to let firefighters battle a sawmill fire in 1998.

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McKoon said he has advised Hunter to run a tight ship.

"The last three fire chiefs have tried to reason and have been out of a job," McKoon said. "My advice is to run this thing like you are a drill sergeant on Parris Island. Everybody at the top can't be wrong."

Decision time

Sgt. Jeff Bowden has been a Phenix City firefighter for nine years.

He has watched the turmoil during his career and said it is reaching a critical stage.

"It has grown and grown, like a pimple that has come to a head," he said. "Something is going to pop."

Council member Ray Bush tried to mediate the differences between the firefighters and the city. He was limited in what he could do because the city's charter strictly prohibits elected officials from getting involved in personnel matters.

His observation: "You have a bunch of young folks that can't seem to realize you got to go to work every day with a good attitude," Bush said.

Bush is convinced the problem will take care of itself.

"In time, the problem will go away," Bush said. "But we have got to have a little more give and take."

Some of the firefighters say they are looking to leave.

Three have applications in with the Columbus department, although they would have to take a pay cut to work on the other side of the Chattahoochee River. Other firefighters have applied for jobs with other departments in the region.

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"Basically, if you are not happy you want to leave, that is what we have been hearing several times," said Sgt. Anne Laidley, a seven-year veteran of the Phenix City department.

Hunter said part of the issue is that firefighters have not learned to "agree to disagree."

"It is hard to resolve a problem when people resort to hate," Hunter said.

Glenn Hill, a Phenix City firefighter for four years, just wants the bickering to stop. He is a member of the union, but was not present at the group interview last week.

He sent the following e-mail to the Ledger-Enquirer:

"I would like to start off by saying I have been working in the fire service, it is a rewarding job. As far as the problems that exist in the Phenix City Fire Department, I can't tell you why they exist but I can tell you what they do. Since I have been employed in Phenix City there has been constant turmoil. I have been called to the phone department to give statements about chiefs arguing, I have been in meetings where I have been told that my hours could change at anytime because there were letters published in the opinion column of a newspaper. I have been told that the public does not like us and thinks we are lazy just want to go to work every day and do my job. ... The unfortunate thing is that I believe there are some very good people in this department. Several of these people have expressed to me that they were seeking employment elsewhere. I just wish the department, from top to bottom, could act as a team and communicate to fix the problems that exist."

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